

Side Peter Brown

Robbie Robertson feels compelled to make each album a big statement and his second solo work, *Storyville* (Geffen) is no exception. One of rock's greatest songwriters and most distinctive guitarists, Robertson -- in his quest to top himself and create a distinction between his new music and his work with the Band -- has forgotten one of music's most important maxims: Less is more.

More focused and satisfying than his solo debut, *Storyville* is burdened by grand arrangements and overdone production leaving little room for spontaneity, which is not to say it's uninspired. Beneath the arrangements, production and often contrived ambiance, are moving songs and soulful performances, despite the fact that Robertson's voice is rarely more than a hoarse, smoky whisper. It soon becomes apparent that the songs aren't all that different than those he wrote for the Band and if *Storyville* was a Band album, people would be raving.

As to the album being about *Storyville*, a fabled place in New Orleans where musicians and other midnight characters partied all night and took part in other up-to-no-good activities, it doesn't really matter, it would be a great title for a Robertson album because he's been a master storyteller all along. Like his best work, most of the songs here tell a story and like his last album, more than a few hint of autobiographical allegory.

Much of *Storyville* was recorded in New Orleans using several of its greatest musicians, but it is not, nor is it trying to be an album of New Orleans music. It is Robbie Robertson music with touches (more than some critics would have you believe) of the New Orleans
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sound. Robertson was influenced by and involved with New Orleans music long before it was trendy and that he should now choose to record in and work with New Orleans musicians is no surprise.

Songs such as "Soap Box Preacher," which has a wonderful horn arrangement by Wardell Quezergue and soulful guitar work by Robertson and "Ressurrection" with its catchy moderately paced melody that builds to a stunning counterpoint chorus are immediately affecting. Also strong are the beautiful "Hold Back the Dawn," with former Band-mate, Rick Danko singing back-up; the single, "What About Now;" the Gospel-tinged "Shake This Town," featuring the Zion Harmonizers and typically awesome keyboard from Garth Hudson; and the album's funkier track "Go Back to Your Woods."

The biggest failure despite great guitar work is the excessive, half sung, half spoken, "Day of Reckoning." When he says, "She was like a young Georgia O'Keefe," you want to hit him. On this song, "Breaking the Rules" and "Rainbow," Robertson overreaches for mood and drama.

Though it's hard to fault Robertson for his explorations of sound, the studio, and his insistence on perfection, he's burying his songs in the process. More than any other songwriter in rock, Robertson knows and understands the music, where it came from and what makes it great. That *Storyville*'s best songs survive his creative ambitiousness is a testament to his talent, but I can't help feeling that these songs would've hit home a lot harder if he'd used three guys named Rick Danko, Garth Hudson and Levon Helm.

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Robertson gave them a direction and they gave him a voice. While Storyville has several excellent moments, it does not touch the work they did together as The Band.

Former Blaster, Dave Alvin has a lot in common with Robertson. Initially known as a guitarist, he turned to songwriting, and like Robertson relied on someone else to do the singing. Influenced by Robertson, Alvin's songs often share similar themes of American history and myth. Alvin also just released his second solo album Blue Boulevard (Hightone). Where Robertson is lost in production and perfection, Alvin knows that a good song and performance is all it takes.

There are several memorable songs such as the Bill Haley tribute, "Haley's Comet," and "Guilty Man," about a man forced to resort to crime with the great line, "I could get a job, but I got my pride/I ain't workin' in no hamburger stand."

When he writes about love gone bad as on "Why Did She Stay With Him," "Gospel Nights," and "Blue Boulevard," the way he sets a scene and describes a situation is so real and clear, that you can't help but identify with the song.

While he doesn't have a great voice, Alvin sings with heart. Combine this with top notch playing, an extensive knowledge and use of American musical forms, and a commitment to real music and you end up with one strong album from one of the country's best songwriters.

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The first thing you notice about John Mellencamp's Whenever We Wanted(Mercury) is the guitars -- fierce, loud, electric guitars that sound like electric guitars. For this album, Mellencamp has abandoned the fiddles, acoustic guitars and back-up singers that characterized his last few records and returned to rock 'n' roll in a manner not unlike recent albums by Neil Young and Lou Reed.

The album starts with the "Love and Happiness," a hard-hitting song that with references to the gulf war, censorship, the recession and a valueless society accurately depicts life in America. The sentiments are carried into the next song, "Now More Than Ever," which has a stirring chorus, but then Mellencamp drops significance for songs that rock hard and sound good but with the exception of the title track, fade from memory as soon as they're over.

Still there's something to be said for the lean mean sound of the band, the funky drumming of Kenny Aronoff and the totally unpretentious feel of the album. It's only rock 'n' roll and Mellencamp knows it.

For all his hits, Bob Seger always seemed like he's trying to catch up and get noticed, which holds true for his first album in five years,The Fire Inside (Capitol). Seger plays catchy, perfectly acceptable rock 'n' roll that sounds good on the car radio. He knows how to write and create hits, with just the right amount of sincerity, coupled with tasty instrumental hooks. At the same time there's something annoyingly calculated about his music. He's trendy without being obvious, and borrows left and right from superior talent.

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Though the cover says the Silver Bullet Band, Seger is mostly backed by the usual crew of studio heavies and fashionable guest artists. He's got accordions and fiddles to show that he's tradition-minded, does one hard rock rave-up, "The Mountain" to show he hasn't forgotten his hard-rockin' Detroit roots, and covers Tom Wait's "New Coat of Paint" so everyone will know he's hip.

No matter what he's singing, Seger always sounds like he's in deep mourning for some personal emotional tragedy or lost innocence. But as sincere as he sounds and as real as he tries to make his songs, he's not believable.

Still, he does sound good on the car radio.